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Fyi.

## Superfund label stokes Silverton's curiosity

### Paying for cleanup would be aided by designation

By [Chase Olivarius-Mcallister](#) Herald staff writer



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Residents in Silverton are balancing the federal funding that would be available through federal Superfund designation to clean toxic water pollution from old mines with the economic hit the community would take from being branded a Superfund site. This contaminated spring, creating a toxic bank along Cement Creek north of town, is an example of the issues faced in the region.

JERRY McBRIDE/Durango Herald file photo

Residents in Silverton are balancing the federal funding that would be available through federal Superfund designation to clean toxic water pollution from old mines with the economic hit the community would take from being branded a Superfund site. This contaminated spring, creating a toxic bank along Cement Creek north of town, is an example of the issues faced in the region.

SILVERTON – Scientists and officials from the Environmental Protection Agency proposing Superfund designation for parts of Silverton received a sometimes skeptical grilling from San Juan County commissioners Wednesday evening.

"Nobody is asking you to leap to designate this site as a national priority," the agency's Region 8 Office Assistant Regional Administrator Martin Hestmark told commissioners, but he warned them that without Superfund designation, there would be no money for long-term cleanup efforts.

The designation would enable the EPA to further study the Upper Animas mine basin, he said.

"Investigation is important to identifying the scope of the problem. That also helps us understand what responsibility may lie with others," he said, referring to mining companies that have operated in Silverton.

Hestmark said if water treatment is needed in perpetuity, the financial requirements would be so great that only Superfund designation could cover the costs.

Commissioner Scott Fetchenhier asked Hestmark, "What are the pros and cons of a Superfund designation?"

In the program's early days, Hestmark said, many communities were wary of the stigma of a Superfund designation.

"I think we've made a lot of progress since then," he said.

The primary benefit of Superfund, he said, is to protect human health and the environment.

Given the "magnitude" of the contributing pollution sources, sustained, long-term funding levels for a cleanup can be assured only by assigning the area a priority status through the Superfund program, said Steve Way, also with the EPA.

County Commissioner Ernest Kuhlman said fellow commissioners were proud of the Animas River Stakeholders Group, and much had been accomplished through its collaborative process.

"Superfund is a collaborative effort, too," Hestmark said. "It's about enlisting the community's ideas. Collaboration doesn't go away with Superfund. The criteria is very much related to community acceptance. We're not just going to go away and come up with our own ideas and force them on the community."

Though EPA officials were adamant they would not seek Superfund designation without Silverton's support, they were straightforward about the Animas' deteriorating water quality, warning the problems could threaten more than the ecosystem.

"We've spent the entire evening tonight worrying about what's happening in the watershed," Hestmark said. "Remember that in mining districts like this, our experience is that we also have to be worried whether there are any risks to human health."

Kuhlman said, "What's your point? Mining is a dangerous business. Always has been, still is."

"What the commissioners need to understand is that water quality has not improved," Way said. "It's gotten worse."

Commissioner Pete McKay said it may be possible to work with Sunnyside Gold Corp., which denies all liability for pollution, and perhaps arrive at "conclusions that Sunnyside Gold and others can live with."

Kuhlman said, "Sunnyside is a big player in here, as you well know, as they well know."

Silverton resident Melodie Skinner urged Superfund designation.

"As I've said for a longtime, we need clean water, jobs, an improved economy. I don't see anything else that's going to bring this much money in the county. Let's go for it."

Kuhlman asked her: "You're doing it for the money?"

She replied, "We're doing it for the clean water."

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